

Press Conference  
“Release of 1982 Report on Health Consequences of Smoking”  
February 22, 1982

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This is a seminal report from the Surgeon General to Congress on smoking (formally presented by the Secretary of Health and Human Services) but it is also an extremely important turning point in the relationship between me, the new Surgeon General, and the press corps. This report was really from 1981, but postponed until I was finally in office.

All during the time between the announcement of the designation of C. Everett Koop by President Reagan as the Surgeon General until the Confirmation on November 16, 1981, the press had been hostile, frequently reporting what they had read in other press accounts rather than doing original research. Non had bothered to have an interview with me and indeed only one article in the print media was published during the aforementioned time that might be considered favorable or complementary to me, the designated Surgeon General – and this was by a freelance reporter and appeared in the Washington Post.

This was the Press Conference, which forced the press corps to reconsider my probable effectiveness as Surgeon General. It was the beginning of a long and increasingly warm relationship between me and the press and essentially marked the end of the adverse criticism of me by the press; their point of view was changed by this Press Conference and I was more and more appreciated by the press corps as time marched on.

It's interesting to compare the statistics on page 5 and contrast them with later reports on the same subject throughout my tenure as Surgeon General.

This report announces the formation of the Coalition of the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, and the American Lung Association into a group known as “Smoking or Health” which worked hand in glove with me throughout the ensuing years.

Although this particular 1982 report was on the specific relationship between smoking and cancers of various types, the presentation covered the subject of smoking like dew covers the ground and was one of the reasons for its broad acceptance by the press corps and voluntary government agencies involved in the smoking issue. The charts included with this report were on easels at the front of the Press Conference room of the Humphrey Building. In subsequent years, as the annual reports on smoking and health became more detailed and comments and questions more critical scientifically and politically, these Press Conferences grew to be the largest in Washington and anyone with a press pass was permitted to attend. That included people who worked on the editorial boards of publications of the tobacco industry itself and the questions became increasingly detailed, piercing, and at times traps set for me. The preparation for this press conference required days of my personal preparation with many editorial advisors trying to guess the questions in order to give appropriate and final answers.

In a sense, except for the numbers, this report is as apropos today as it was in 1982 indicating that the fight against smoking really never becomes outdated.

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1982 Report to Congress on smoking  
or health – Press conference – critical

Cancer  
Smoking